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DISPATCH

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Traffic in disease

Newsday has gone to rather great lengths to track down an African swine fever outbreak that hit Cuba in 1971. The incident was the first appearance of the disease in the western hemisphere and was labeled the "most alarming event" of 1971 by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization.

The disease does not affect people, only pigs. The Cubans killed some half a million pigs to prevent a nationwide epidemic and all pork production was stopped on the island for months. Pork is a staple in the Cuban diet.

The question was how the disease got into Cuba. *Newsday* thinks it has the answer. You're probably ready for it: the CIA. The newspaper has found "a U.S. intelligence source" (not further identified) who claims to have been given a vial of the virus at a CIA training camp in the Panama Canal Zone with instructions to turn it over to an anti-Castro terrorist group.

Newsday said further investigation uncovered a series of steps by which the vial was transported from the Canal Zone into Cuba. Some details, but no names, are included.

The CIA won't comment, of course, and we must start with the usual disclaimer that you can't believe everything you read in the

papers (even our own), but the horror is that such an account no longer can be shrugged off as "unthinkable."

American germ geniuses have played games in our own country; why should they leave Cuba alone? There seems little doubt now that American agents were sending the Mafia after Castro: why spare his pigs?

It's a scurvy kind of business (again, if true) to be going after the food supply of a neighbor. Castro may not be a buddy, but no one has seen fit to declare war on him either, not even while we were shooting Communists (among others) to make Southeast Asia safe for democracy.

And (if true) the introduction of a previously unknown virus into this side of the world is unbelievably stupid. No one with even a few creaking brain cells could possibly rest assured that a virus could be turned loose on an island off the American coast and simply stay there. There's too darned much traffic back and forth — in spies, if nothing else. Imagine the excitement among American farmers when it arrived.

It should also be noted that the reported germ sabotage came two years after President Nixon banned the use of offensive chemical and biological warfare.